Analysis of the First Movement of Bela Bartok Viola Concerto

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to give some information to a violist who doesn't started to play Bartok viola concerto yet. Firstly, I will mention about the composing process of Bela Bartok viola concerto which contains information of how this concerto is written and the which issues are faced, secondly I will mention the formal analysis of the first movement like where the expositions ends and where development is started and the performance analysis which show the musical phrases and how it can be played by the violist, takes place lastly. Although musical ideas vary from person to person, as I writing the performance analysis, I based on the interpretations of Yuri Bashmet, Kim Kashkashian and also I took some help from my viola teacher Sema Hakioğlu, who is working at Music and Performing Arts of Bilkent University.

The Composing Process of Bela Bartok Viola Concerto

Last composition period of Bela Bartok is after movement to America between 1940 and 1945. In this period of time he studied serbo croat folk music at Colombia University. William Primrose wanted from him to write viola concerto. First time, Bartok he did not accept because he does not feel close to viola as solo instrument. Yet, he listened Primrose while he was playing William Walton's Viola Concerto on radio programme he changed his decision. In 8 September 1945, Bartok mention about his viola concerto is ready on sketch and just remained writing notes. Furthermore, Bartok defined concerto as "it has been created in the master style."
Some passages may seem to disturbing and not to be played. We can discuss later according to your observation." At 21 September, Bartok was taken to hospital because of leukemia and he died at 26 September. Seryl claims that last works of Bartok is the era of progress to new composing style. If Primrose would meet with Bartok before he death, many secrets of the sketches would be solved. At October 1945, notes of Third Piano Concerto and Viola Concerto have been entrusted to Tibor Serly. Tibor Serly was close friend and student of Bartok and also he was viola player and composer. Serly was the group member of NBC Symphony Orchestra conducting by Toscanini which viola group chief was William Primrose. He completed Bartok's Viola Concerto because he was well knowing musical style of Bartok and well knowing technical capacity of viola. Before Bartok's death Serly asked him about finish of Viola Concerto and Bartok answered him "both yes and no". It took two years to complete the Concerto between 1946 and 1948. Serly decided to prepare arrangement of Viola Concerto for cello. After completed both versions of viola and cello, Burton Fisch (violist) and David Soyer (cellist) played them. Although Serly prepared both version, it published as Viola Concerto because Primrose had the letters of prepayment which Bartok sent him when he was living. In December 1949 Primrose played first performance of Viola Concerto with Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati. Viola concerto became popular among the musicians and audiences.

**Formal Analysis of the First Movement of Bela Bartok Viola Concerto**

First movement starts with moderato tempo and this is a longest movement. It has a sonata structure. First movement takes approximately 15 minutes long. The second movement is in allegro religioso tempo and it is approximately 5 minutes. Lastly the third movement is allegro vivace tempo and it takes approximately 4 minutes. Figure 1, which comes under the performance analysis topic, is the main motive of the first movement and it comes lots of time with a little change until the end of movement. Bars between 52 to 54 viola plays the second motive, which generated from the first main motive. Exposition ends at the bar 80 and development is between from the bars...
81 to 145. Recapitulation is between the bars 146 to 204 and coda is between 205th and 244th bars and lastly 245 to 249 is the attaca section.

**Performance Analysis of the First Movement of Bela Bartok Viola Concerto**

The main motive comes with first bar to fourth bar and it is the most important motive, it develops, changes but comes a lot until the end of the first movement. The main motive is played by not only with the violist but also nearly all members of orchestra. The first two bars sound like question and the third and fourth bars sound like an answer of the first two bars.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

The main issue with this motive is that even if it sounds like very lyrical phrase which it is, it should not be played with too much vibration. Violist should play the main motive very legato, smooth and nearly non-vibration. The phrase requires to played with very deep sound which can be generated both with upper string positions played on lower strings and playing bow nearly to fingerboard. In this version of main motive, it is not possible to play it with upper positions however when it comes in lower octaves it becomes possible. Main motive starts with 2nd position in viola. The fluency of the main motive continues to end of 13th bar. In the fifth bar, a triplet idea comes which enables a rhythmic accelerando. (Figure 2)

![Figure 2](image2.png)
In the 7th bar accelerando radically come out with 16th notes which can be seen at figure 3.

Figure 3

Poco crescendo starts with the accelerando and it should be played in the lower part of the bow. In this passage between the bar number 7 and 10, music reaches to highest note B-flat which ever played until here. It should be played with molto vibrato and music becomes very aggressive after playing B-flat note in the bar number 10. (Figure 4)

Figure 4

11th bar can be played like ad libitum, there is no problem to change the tempo because viola plays solo. In the end of 13th bar, the end of all big phrase that starts the beginning until here, finishes with crescendo unlike the most general phrases and with accentuated B-flat note. Until the end of bar 13, sounds like introduction of the main motive. In the 14th bar, main motive comes again with a little rhythmical chance. (Figure 5)

Figure 5
The third bar at figure 5 should be played in different tone, it is much more darker than main motive because of that it can be played in upper positions in C-string. Red signed notes have a folkloric character which can be played more faster than normal in order to show it. There is a C note which should be played forte with diminuendo at the end of the figure 5. Viola starts to accompany the orchestra that takes the main motive and this continues the end of the bar 24.
At the bar 25, viola takes the main motive again, which should be played in D string until 29th bar, until the beginning of the bar 30 the playing is same with main motive. However, after the bar 30 music becomes more lyrical and should be played espressivo. At the end of 33rd bar, a rhythmical accelerando stars with triplets then in 34th bar continues with 16th notes which is even faster.

The red signed notes can be played faster in order to resemble folkloric motive. The third beat in 33rd bar forte nuance disappears with diminuendo and at the end of that bar violist can take a breath break just before to playing 34th bar. 34th bar starts mezzo piano and this phrase should be played very smooth and fluent. In the bars 34 and 35 shows the musical grouping of notes which does not follow the rhythmical grouping. The third beat of 36th bar has a very big crescendo, which provides playing the last beat forte. At the bar 37, viola plays forte. The E note in the second beat of 37th bar should be played very clear with intense vibration. This phrase continues.
until the beginning of the bar 41. The red marks show where the musical line goes. (Figure 8)

Purple signed chords can be considered musically out-beats of C note which comes in the bar 41. (Figure 9) After this note music becomes very energetic and intense which should be played in the lower part of bow with fully contacted hairs.

Figure 8

Purple signed chords can be considered musically out-beats of C note which comes in the bar 41. (Figure 9) After this note music becomes very energetic and intense which should be played in the lower part of bow with fully contacted hairs.

Figure 9 - 41st bar
At figure 9, from the C note to the end of bar should be considered as one instrument and the first beat of 42nd bar can be considered as another instrument and it is same with the figures 10 and 11. Namely, these two motives should be played with different sounds to help the audience for differentiate them. In 47th bar, after a beat, orchestra repeats the phrase that is played by soloist. (Figure 12)
Red-signed phrase played by viola is repeated with little differences, in the bar 48 firstly flutes takes the phrase then oboe plays it. In the second beat of 49th bar, oboe plays the repetition until the second beat of 50th bar. Because of that, in this phrase viola and orchestra are both important rather than a viola, which is accompanied by an orchestra. Until the bar 52, music was very powerful and energetic yet, music becomes very lyrical at 52nd bar. Violist can play this part with intense vibration, very legato and can slow down the tempo a little. The folkloric motives that come in second and third beat of 53rd bar can be played a little faster.

Figure 13 Bars between 51 to 59

In 54th bar orchestra takes the same phrase that viola played in 52nd bar and takes it to the end of the bar 60. Viola plays very lyrical phrase in 61st bar, which is very smooth and gentle. Viola starts this phrase piano and it should be played very legato. Using the whole bow can help to player. This phrase ends in 66th bar. Until the end of this phrase orchestra accompanies the viola with playing viola's phrase. (Figure 14)
At figure 14, the red and blue makings show the motives, which comes viola and orchestra with a little difference. The purple markings shows folkloric motives which can be played a little faster. Until the end of figure 14 is forte, the last note D-sharp which viola is playing has a diminuendo and nuance should immediately go to piano.
At figure 15, music starts in piano nuance with crescendo and B note played by viola. Music reaches forte nuance and it should be played very clear with vibration. Violist can use his bow lower to middle in 67th bar.

Figure 16

From 70th bar to 72, violist should play very piano nuance and this part can be considered as accompany to orchestra, in fact it is not but it sounds like accompaniment. Because of the fact that, viola plays solo between the bars 73 to 76, it can be though as a little cadenza, which provides soloist to play freely like playing ad libitum.

Figure 17 Bars 75-79
G-sharp and C in 77th bar should be played forte. At the end of bar 76 viola gives the music to orchestra with tenuto.

Figure 18
At 80th bar, there is a rhythmical ritardando. At 81st bar viola starts to play fragmentations of main motive of the first movement, which actually reminiscent, until the end of 87th bar then at 88th bar orchestra takes the same fragmentations and continues to end of 94th bar. (Figure 19) Viola is accompanying to orchestra at 88th and 89th bars.
Figure 20 and 21 should be played very soft and legato, also it is a little bit slower comparing the rest of the first movement. It starts with piano nuance but has a very dark sound which can be generated by playing the bow near to fingerboard. This phrase should be played as a one piece until the end of 98th bar. The beginning of 99th bar starts very energetic with a clear warm tone. This phrase is starts at 99th bar and end in the first beat of 102nd bar.

Violist accompanies the orchestra from the second beat of the 102nd bar to the first beat of the 108th bar. (Figure 23) Red sign shows which instrument continues the motive. Firstly, oboe plays than violin cello takes the same motive and lastly oboe takes the motive back.
Figure 23 Bars between 102-106

Figure 24 Between the bars 107 to 113
Viola plays very energetic and forte at 112th bar. Violist should use his bow lower to middle in this passage. Music turns into a little aggressive in here and it continues until the end of 119th bar. Between the bars 112 to 119, both viola and the orchestra have equal musical importance. While viola is playing very soloistic part, orchestra plays some motives, which is played with different instruments. (Figure 25)

First two bars at figure 25, the motive is played orchestral instruments one by one, red sign shows the connection between motives among instruments. 
In the bar 113, viola and orchestra have a descending motion and it's reverse motion is in 117th bar which ascends.
Figure 26
At figure 26, red signed 5 note motive floats among orchestral instruments again. At 120th bar, music become very soft and lyrical, it should be played with all bow and very legato. This phrase ends in the first beat of 124th bar. Viola starts to play the introduction of cadenza at 127th bar and it continues until the 136th bar. I called this phrase as a introduction of cadenza because of that orchestra does not accompany the viola, viola plays solo. At figure 27, Viola starts to play solo with an introduction and it can be played in flexible rhythm. The motives that played before is now played by solo viola in cadenza-like section.

Figure 27
At figure 28, which shows the 129th bar, it looks like there is two notes like double stop. However the important note is the lower note, which can be seen with red-sign and these notes should be played with vibration and with higher volume than the upper notes.
At 131st bar, music is very energetic and there are double stopped 16th notes. At this motive, the melodic line is at the lower part and this part should be played vibrated and with loud sound because of the fact that this part should be easily separated by the audience. (Figure 29)

Between the third beat of the bar 132 to end of 133rd bar, it can be considered as double stops are melodic lines and the others are accompanies to them.

At figure 30 red marked notes should be played with vibration and maybe a little accentuation. At the figure 31, the actual melodic line is at the bottom part and again it should be played different than the upper parts of the chords.
The actual cadenza starts at the last beat of the bar 135. Actually, it seems like cadenza ends in 152nd bar mechanically, but musically end of cadenza is at 147th bar. At the beginning of cadenza starts very lyrical and after 3 bars later continues with crescendo with very energetic playing. (Figure 32)

Figure 32

At the bar number 140, notes jumps over the strings, to play the phrase like this violist should check his right elbow to make these phrases easier to play.

Figure 33 Bars between 144 to 146

At the figure 33, the energy of music decrease and it starts to calm down with diminuendo. The third bar at figure 33 starts with the nuance piano.
Figure 34 Bars between 147 to 160
With the beginning of the bar 147, viola accompanies the orchestra and at the bar 151, orchestra starts to play varied main motive of the first movement and plays solo. At the bar 160 viola starts to play again with an energetic passage with the piano nuance. This passage comes from two bars before with the cello part and continues with viola at the end of 161st bar. At the end of the 161st bar, the phrasing is similar with the end of figure 8 which shows purple marked out-beats of figure 9. At figure 35 the
phrasing is same with the figure 9, 10 and 11.
The last bar of figure 35 starts a new phrase and continues until the end of 171st bar. This phrase has the same feature of the figure 12.

Figure 36

At the bar 173, viola plays a motive that is already played at the bar 52, but this motive is in a major scale which can be played with brighter tone. (Figure 37) At 175th bar orchestra takes the motive that viola played in 173rd bar. The first three beat, which is played by viola at figure 37, is repeated with orchestra after two bars.
Viola starts to play a lyrical but a very rhythmical phrase in 185th bar and continues until the end of 192nd bar. (Figure 38)

The red-signed notes should be played very fast at figure 38. Viola starts to play this phrase mezzo piano, but when the second time the same motive comes, it turns in to mezzo forte nuance. At the figure 39, red marks show the leading melodic motive in score. The second beats of the bars 186 and 189 can be played a little faster.
At the beginning of the bar 193, violist starts a phrase piano which is played already played before at 67th bar. It starts with piano nuance with crescendo and the end of 194th bar music reaches forte nuance. At 195th bar violist starts to play expressivo and at the beginning of the bar 200, viola gives the phrase to the orchestra and orchestra repeats it.
At the bar 207, viola plays a motive which resembles the main motive played at the beginning of the first movement. Because of that, the tone of this phrase should be same with the main motive's tone. When viola ends his phrase orchestra takes it and starts to repeat at 210th bar then viola plays same motive again with a little difference at 213th bar and orchestra repeats it after 2 bars. All these phrases should be played forte and with the usage of the whole bow. (Figure 41)

![Figure 41](image_url)

At figure 42, markings show the continuity of the musical line. This phrase should be played very legato and should be considered as a part of orchestral line.
At the end of 220th bar orchestra starts to play very energetic motive in forte nuance and at the second beat of the bar 221 viola plays the same motive like an echo of orchestra. This phrase ends at the beginning of the bar 224.
At figure 44, from the bar number 227 to 230, music goes from the nuance piano to silence. After figure 44, a new forte but slow phrase starts and it should be played aggressive with whole bow and making accentuations on the longer notes which is marked with red sign. (Figure 45)

Figure 45

At the last two bars in figure 45, violist is free to change the tempo a little because he is playing solo in this phrase. At the figure 46, music becomes very aggressive especially with the 32nd notes. Red signed notes should be played very loud and vibrated with accents. At blue marked notes, violist should make a ritardando to show music goes to C note which is played with sforzando. After the first beat of the bar 245 viola gives the music to orchestra and orchestra ends the first movement of the Bartok viola concerto but there no stop between the end of first movement and second movement, it directly continues to second movement.
Figure 46 Bars between 240-248

Conclusion
To sum up, three main topic is mentioned, the first one is how Bartok wrote the concerto, the second one is the formal structure of the first movement and the last one is how the first movement performed. This work is one of the very important concerto among the biggest concertos like Walton, Hindemith and Schnittke in viola repertoire. It is generally a requirement for conservatory entrance and orchestra entrance exams and competitions. I hope, this essay helps the interpretations of violists.

**Bibliography**